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ABSTRACT

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Minoritarianism and Ethnic Group Communications

by

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and

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(ABSTRACT: This article contends that the relational aspects of minority ethnic group communications have not been given due attention and that an adequate explication of the concept of minoritarianism is necessary for the better understanding of minority group communication processes. The paper deals with the explication problem and presents the findings of a thematic content analysis of a Black student publication to explain and illustrate the variables operative in minority ethnic group communications.)

INTRODUCTION

Most of the large and growing number of ethnic and other minority communication studies can be criticized on

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at least three grounds:[1]

1. They place too much emphasis on the pathologies of language or of mass media usage.

2. They lack adequate conceptual basis; they make little use of concepts that have theoretic and systematic import.

3. They fail to distinguish minority communication studies from intercultural, inter-ethnic or even international communication studies.

These problems exist primarily because most of the studies are organism-centered. In that sense, they attempt to find the deficiencies of specified ethnic or other minority groups from a socio-anthropological perspective which views a minority as a given and constant entity and then attempts to provide its demographic characteristics. This approach generally neglects the process or interactive aspects of minority communications which is relational, dynamic, and diachronic.

Although some mass media studies do focus on the relational aspects of minority communications, these studies generally take the "treatment" viewpoint which seeks to find how the mass media treat and, therefore, perpetuate or reduce prejudicial attitudes towards

ethnic and other minority groups in society.[2] As such, these studies fall within the general rubric of "effects of discrimination" studies which have been criticized on such methodological grounds as the use of standardized white middle-class personality inventories and the failure to recognize that cultural differences interact with patterns of discrimination to produce individual and group reactions. There is also the problem of biased interpretation of data whereby prejudice in the majority group, for example, is explained as reflecting normal incorporation into and adjustment to aspects of social institutions rather than as reflecting personal pathology.[3]

The difficulty of distinguishing among minority, inter-ethnic, intercultural, and international communication studies is understandable because (a) there are high correlations among some of the attributes of the poor and those of some ethnic minorities and (b) all communication is cultural to some extent; communication being a significant part of culture. Culture itself is defined as a mutuality of influence in a complex system of social and institutional contents, structures, and processes or "as a system in which messages cultivate and regulate the relations between people."[4]

This article conceptualizes minoritarianism from the perspective of communication and then presents a content analysis of a Black student newspaper to illustrate and describe some of the processes which take place in ethnic minority-majority communication contexts.

THE CONCEPT OF MINORITARIANISM

A more adequate analysis of minority-majority communications necessitates the use of the concept, minoritarianism, which is a variable rather than the concept, minority, which is a constant. A variable would allow consideration of the relational, process, contextual, and rule-oriented nature of communication. We view communication here as symbolic interaction which involves verbal and non-verbal processes having different degrees of explicitness.[5] The use of minoritarianism would also clarify how minority-majority communication is, in inter-ethnic contexts, confounded by ethnic group processes to produce certain peculiarities of communication.

Minoritarianism is defined formally here as a relational, diachronic, and dynamic concept that is complementary to majoritarianism (or dominancy) in a system of power (that is, of communication control) imbalance

in which the dominant subsystem retains the power to make formal and informal rules governing communicative interaction between it and the minority subsystem and in which the minority is, thereby, objectively and subjectively deprived.

The concept has meaning only with reference to a specified environment. Although theoretically applicable to most communication situations, it has definitive and practical import only in those (persistent) situations in which the assignment of the attributes of dominance and minority is based on a reified and stereotypical social and objective reality determined either by discriminatory low valuation of the communicative competencies of one subsystem and/or by previous deprivation by the other subsystem.

The crucial variable in the analysis of minoritarianism is power with reference to operative communication rules of which the dimensions of understanding, clarity, range, specificity, and homogeneity have been mentioned.[6]

A certain degree of clarity and accurate understanding of the operative rules by the parties in interaction is necessary for effective communication to take place. It is also necessary that the parties appreciate

the number of different contexts or circumstances in which the same communicative actions are applicable (the rule range), the number of different communicative actions which are applicable in a particular situation (the rule specificity), and the degree to which accurate understandings are evenly distributed among participants in a communication system (the rule homogeneity).[7]

Unequal distribution among participants in a communication system of the power to determine the propriety and dimensions of operative rules is a sufficient condition for minoritarianism. The significant power and influence exercised by one systematic component over the other is that of imposition of "his" own set of rules of communication.

Since individuals bring different sets of communication rules to the (communication) situation, the transactional process of achieving consensus or compromise on the rules is said to be part of communication. As Cushman and Whiting put it[8], this

> involves the projection of one's rules, their testing in the crucible of interaction, and the emergence of understandings or rules leading to understanding of information. The transaction may be dominated by one individual with power to impose his view of the world, his procedures, his content--his rules--on others. (underlines are ours).

The control over rules enables the dominant component in the communication system to determine the pattern of communication. While the best communication is that which establishes a symmetrical, reciprocal relationship in which at least two "components influence one another, perhaps over different matters at the same time, or perhaps over the same matter at different times", the concept of minoritarianism involves an asymmetrical communicatory relationship. Here "one component is the causal agent and another is the affected object----the first systematic component (individual, role, group, etc.) influences the second and possibly exercises power over the second."[9]

When communication takes on this synchronic character which lacks multiple, complex or plural social causation or influence, minoritarianism is said to exist in the communication situation.

A MINORITY

As conceptualized here, different degrees of minoritarianism exist in different communication situations. At the interpersonal level of communication, for instance, the necessary and sufficient condition for minoritarianism may exist without there being <u>a minority</u> (implying a persistent and high degree of minoritarianism) since the

situation may be very dynamic with communicator roles constantly changing. Also, those situations in which the dominance of one individual by another is the result of such personal communicator attributes as expertise and the like, are of a special order.

It is at the inter-group level of communication that power imbalance--the basic condition of minoritarianism--becomes compounded by group processes to produce persistent processes of discrimination and deprivation.

The significant group processes are identity of group members, stereotyping and reification of group attributes, as well as discrimination and deprivation. These processes always impair effective communication. But when the groups involved are ethnic, the intensity of primordial ties and sentiments combined with mistrust of out-groups often leads to polarization of the groups and consequently greater malfunctioning of operative communication rules.

In such situations, the level of understanding is usually too low for meaningful interaction to take place. And there is usually little change in the degrees of rule range, specificity and homogeneity as the communication system levels move from the mass to the interpersonal level.

For instance, greater and greater homogeneity ordinarily exists as one moves from the macro to the micro communication levels.[10] In ethnic minority-majority communication contexts, however, the communication participants generally view homogeneity as a constant, principally because they stereotype and reify individual and group attributes. The implication is that the "what" and the "where" dimensions of the Laswellian communication paradigm are much less significant, than ordinarily, in such communication contexts, while the "who" dimension is dominant.[11]

Under these circumstances communication becomes an intransigent power encounter. The arena for such intergroup encounters is the national society (and its administrative and institutional subunits) because this is the operative level at which those resources or facilities that determine communicative capacities are differentially allocated. The physical or cultural attributes (example,--racial, religious) that discriminates between members of the national minorities and those of the majority may, of course, go beyond the boundaries of the society.

The physical and cultural characteristics of the majority group and those of the minority serve as foci

of identity and as objects and subjects of stereotyping and reification for the respective members. However, the control by the majority group over the rules and facilities for communication enables it to impose its own set of rules as the societal or community standard.

The rules include not only the agenda for further allocation of facilities for communication, but also the valuation of those physical and cultural attributes which serve as basic communicative facilities for members of the respective groups. The majority group is, therefore, able to assign high values to its own attributes and low values to minority attributes. When this discriminatory assignment of values is made the basis of resource allocation, the minority becomes deprived. But, the members of the minority group must be individually and collectively aware of the deprivation for it to be socially significant.

In the processes of reification and stereotyping in minority-majority communications, the most distinguishing and generalized physical or cultural mark of identity for members of each group becomes the criterion determinant of values placed on all other attributes that make up the image of the group.

In stereotyping, these attributes are homogenized by the other-group members by assigning them with equal strength to individual members of the group in all relevant situations. In reification, the members of the group homogenize in-group members by equally assigning them to the attributes that constitute the generalized image of the in-group.

ANALYSIS OF A MINORITY MEDIUM

Because the mass media as a cultural institution is one of the most important channels through which groups express their collective images, its contents are partly the result of reification, stereotyping and other group processes. And because ethnic minority media usually emphasize leadership functions, its contents are good indices of the group's primary themes or goals which all significant minority groups have even if individual members are divided on policy.[12]

A minority may seek, for instance, to achieve assimilation into, pluralism with, and seccession from the majority group. It may also seek a reversal of the status quo by which it puts itself in a dominant position vis-a-vis the majority group. The choice and application of these

themes in general depend on a number of contextual or situational factors such as the type of minority, the presence of such catalysts as organizers and the mass media, the type and intensity of repression or rejection, as well as the group identity, claims, and expectations.[13] College students, women, and a variety of ethnic groups, for instance, do not seek the same goals even though all consider themselves minorities in certain contexts.

The case study reported here identifies the dominant themes of a publication that proclaimed itself the spokesman of a specified minority. We hope, through content analysis, to gain more insight into the concept of minoritarianism in minority communications.

The context of the study is a non-urban state university campus located in the southern coastal area of Rhode Island. Black students constitute about one percent of a student population of about twelve thousand. There is a black student organization called by the Swahili name of Uhuru Sasa (Freedom Now). The black population in the state is similarly small and is concentrated in the city of Providence about thirty miles north.

The campus has one major student newspaper, The Good 5¢ Cigar, financed from the student activities tax and, therefore, controlled by the student body through its senate. A campus radio station, WRIU, is similarly financed and controlled. A weekly, The Narragansett Times, serves the community surrounding the university. Statewide print and broadcast media are also easily available on campus.

In 1972, the student senate received requests for and decided to finance two alternative publications--The Black Gold and the Moustache--both appearing irregularly for about one year.[14] These two publications had, at least one thing in common: they believe the "establishment" student media, The Cigar and WRIU, were inadequate for diversified information needs of the campus.

The Black Gold, edited and staffed by black students, published its first issue on October 12, 1972, declaring itself "a realistic means of ending any existing communications problems between the Black Community-campus population". It went on, "In order to grow and develop community power, we must develop communications power."[15]

It was not evident, however, whether the paper was referring to the black community on campus or throughout the state of Rhode Island for the editorial went on, "It is time Black peoples possessed and controlled their own news media. We have suffered too long, the distortion and indifference of the now-present white news publications."[16] The paper then pledged to publish materials relevant to Black peoples "from a totally Black perspective."

It is clear that the purpose of the paper was to bolster the identity of the Black Community--something, with which, as the paper put it, black peoples can identify. In its first issue, the paper wrote of the black renaissance, of breaking away from the white standards of beauty, of black political crossroads, and of the implementation of the black agenda which would change the American political arena.

Other features in the issue included an interview piece, "The Black Student Dilemma", in which some black students expressed discontent and depression about being part of a predominantly white campus community; a personality feature on "The Rising of a Black Woman" describing the self-reliance and occupational rise of a black woman who holds an administrative position on campus; the acquisition of a new headquarters by the

Afro-American Society (Uhuru Sasa); and "Thoughts on Black Studies" in which the director of the black studies program emphasized the obligation to use education as a social tool.

This eight-page issue also provided some statistics on the black population in the state of Rhode Island and on the county and racial distribution of family income and poverty status. There were several poems of which the general theme is the creativity of black people.

The type of "relevant" information the paper published did not, on the whole, lend itself to presentation in the conventional format of a newspaper. The content and its structural arrangement were unorthodox: only one item in this first issue can be classified as "news" by traditional standards.

The last issue of the paper (December 19, 1973) was as noteworthy as the first for it was essentially a reaction to the cessation of funding by the student senate. The editors who seemed aware from the beginning of the financially precarious position of the paper now agreed that it was, indeed, a black community paper rather than a student paper, an argument the Student Senate used in cutting off funding. The editors opined, however, that

the paper was an "educational, cultural, and social tool which can contribute to educational horizons of the many naive white students unaware of black attitudes and thoughts." "With URI's dismally low minority enrollment statistics and its tragically limited minority-oriented academia," the editors went on, "the student senate was in no position to reject the small voice Black Gold wishes to strengthen."[17]

In submitting what they called a "proper and dignified goodbye" the editors turned for help to the R.I. black community. The editorial appeal of this last issue was very state-wide; the editorial bemoaning the dearth of black mass media in the state where blacks were "reminded daily that white distortion is still a dismal and destructive device....that presupposed white objectivity objects to black intrusion or interjection...that radio air waves are over-ridden with too many non-identifiable fabrications."[18]

This edition raised anew the issue of the small number of black students and staff on campus and asked whether the university was accepting its responsibilities. Other features dealt with Portuguese imperialism in Africa and with the plight of the black laborer.

GENERAL CONTENT

The seven other editions of the Black Gold generally followed the same format as the first and last issues. The only exception was the April, 1973, issue devoted almost entirely to the effects of the Nixon Administration budget cuts on the R.I. minority programs. Otherwise, the overall content structure indicates much emphasis on poetry and other feature stories with some items focusing on the university, some on the state, and some on national and international levels. There was a lot of philosophical content and almost every issue contained some important statistics on the black community.

The distribution of items in all nine issues of the paper is shown in Table I. The item count excludes poems, photographic materials and book reviews. Table I classified the items according to racial, locational, and evaluative foci; also whether the subject-matter is "person" or "thing". Table II shows the distribution of the Black Gold content according to themes.

The research question did not require sophisticated methodology. The coding of items was simple and presented no serious validity problems. It was therefore easy to evaluate and place the items on the relevant categories.

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Overall agreement between the two coders was almost complete.

We see in Table I, a great emphasis on black-oriented subject matter as the paper intended; even items that were classified as having a white institutional or personality focus were mostly written from the point of view of how the black community is affected. A piece on "Women's Liberation and the Black Women", for instance, concludes that "one must not so easily include the Black woman in the generalized fight, for she has a separate yet significant role in the liberation of her very own".[19]

TABLE I ABOUT HERE

The overall impression is that of black-white racial dichotomization with little attempt made to coalesce with other minorities. Although editorial emphasis was on the black community, "community" was variously interpreted as blacks on campus, blacks in Rhode Island, blacks in the United States, and blacks all over the world. Beyond the United States, however, there was more identification with blacks in the African continent and to a lesser extent with those in the West Indies.

Most of the educational and socio-cultural items focus on the university campus while most of the economic and

political items focus on the state and national levels.

In spite of the generally agressive editorial tone, one does not find too high orientation to negativism although the rather high editorial positivism could plausibly be attributed to articles being written from the perspective of black efforts succeeding despite the institutional bias of the society. This is particularly true of the personality features which are surprisingly elitist.

TABLE II ABOUT HERE

This general trend shows up in Table II in which the thematic distribution of content indicates a great deal of emphasis on both discrimination and racism as well as on the progress that black people have made. Thus, while there is much emphasis on the theme of racism and discrimination, the underlying theme is that, with effort and unity, blacks would make progress. There is, therefore, an absence of the general feeling of powerlessness which is said to be the crucial attribute of minorities.

A certain amount of powerlessness can, however, be identified in parts of the paper. An interview with black students, for example, revealed a strong feeling of depression, social isolation, dispersion, dilemma and irrelevance

in "striving to obtain educational goals in an unrelative environment". "Ethnically speaking", an interviewee said, "there should be more Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, etc....more different people relating together. Being around a totally dominant race is hard."[20]

But ever here, one does not find a feeling of total powerlessness. For instance, a freshman had this to say about why she attends the university:[21]

> I watch how white people have been getting on Blacks all the time.... they can't stand to see us on the same level. Since I know this, I just keep pushing harder. I am here doing what they don't want me to do. White people upset me but I know I upset them too. I keep pushing because I know someday, Black people are going to get over"

One thing must be said, though; this type of printed hostility does not seem to exist in most of the observed interpersonal relations between white and black students.

Organization

In another milieu, Black Gold, could have been a successful enterprise. But in the environment in which it was born it was doomed to an early death: it was anaemic both from the professional and the business points of view. The expressive outlet for black students as well as the

information which the paper provided were very important, indeed. However, with a minuscule of real rather than proclaimed audience, the paper could not be "possessed and controlled by black peoples." It was, in fact, controlled by the Student Senate who invoked its powers to cut off funding after nine editions of the paper.

During the senate floor debate, some student senators called the paper "racist", saying it was a black community and not a student publication. The editors of the paper agreed with the second characterization but denied the paper was racist.

The paper did not attract a substantial readership in the black community, for some reason.[22] Virtually nothing was done about the business aspect of the paper. The masthead showed that an editor-in-chief, an associate editor, two assistant editors, and a managing editor constituted the management board. A staff of five were also listed who along with the editors generated most of the editorial material published in the paper.[23] For all intents and purposes, the paper was to be a subsidized publication like the other student media on campus. There was very little advertizing even though a lot of open space was wasted, "wasted" from the point of view of conventional newspaper format.

CONCLUSION

Overall, available evidence indicates that pluralism is the basic theme which the Black Gold emphasized. The editors wanted to play some leadership role in creating a unified black community base. In this attempt they reified black peoples and homogenized black communities. Pluralism, however, implies some multiple independence of means. The management of the paper failed to acquire this through lack of time, effort, competence or other. Editorial independence can scarcely be separated from financial independence.

There is plenty of evidence in the paper to support a contention that the editors were aware of deprivation and discrimination; but while there was little feeling of powerlessness, the history of the Black Gold tells us that the real and ultimate power over communication rules rested with the majority (of the student body).

There were at least three ways by which the paper could have survived: persuade the generality of the student body to support it despite the "hostile" editorial bent, create an alternative base of support, comply with the rules of the student senate. None of these was successfully done. Consequently, the communication problems the paper set out to solve remain.

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2. Examples: Jack Lyle (ed.), The Black American and the Press, 1968; H. Fischer and R. Lowestein, Race and the News Media, 1967; Christopher Bagley, "Race Relations and the Press: An Empirical Analysis," Race, July, 1973, 59-89; K. K. Cox, "Changes in Stereotyping of Negroes and Whites in Magazine Advertisements," Public Opinion Quarterly, 33, 1969-1970; C. Dimas, "The Effect of Motion Pictures Portraying Black Models on the Self-concept of Black Elementary School Children," Dissertation Abstracts International, 1970, 31, 2609-2610; C. Roberts, "The Portrayal of Blacks on Network Television," Journal of Broadcasting, 1970, 15:1, 45-58.

3. Hoyt S. Alverson, "Minority Group Autonomy and the Rejection of Dominant Group Racial Methodologies: The Zulu of South Africa," African Studies, 1974, 33:1, 3-24.

4. George Gerbner, "Communication and Social Environment," The Scientific American, September, 1972, p. 153.

5. Robert Nwankwo, "Communication as Symbolic Interaction: A Synthesis," Journal of Communication, June, 1973, p. 203.

6. D. Cushman and G. Whiting, "An Approach to Communication Theo-y: Towards Conssensus on Rules," The Journal of Communication, September, 1972 p. 232.

7. Ibid, 232-234.

8. Ibid, p. 235.

9. Andrew S. McFarland, Power and Leadership in Plural Systems, Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1969, p. 20.

10. Cushman and Whiting, op. cit., p. 234.

11. The paradigm, "Who says What, to Whom, through what Channel, and with what Effect?" is useful in "effect" or propaganda analysis.

12. J. Milton Yinger, A Minority Group in American Society, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1965, p. 31.

13. S. J. Makielski, Jr., Beleaguered Minorities, San Francisco, Cal.: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1973.

14. Black Gold published October, November, December, 1972; January, February, March, April, November, December, 1973. Moustache was a satire publication staffed and edited by some white students. It lost its funding at the same time Black Gold did but regained it after a challenge of the Student Senate action. However, publication did not resume, the editors saying they wanted to prove the Senate was prejudiced.

15. Black Gold, October, 1972, p. 1.

16. Ibid.

17. Black Gold, December, 1973, p. 12.

18. Ibid. p. 2.

19. Black Gold, December, 1972, p. 6.

20. Black Gold, October, 1972, p. 3.

21. Ibid.

22. An editor of the paper said the Black community regarded Black Gold as "just a student paper."

23. It is evident that several outside sources were used but not always acknowledged.

TABLE I

%DISTRIBUTION OF ITEMS BY SUBJECT MATTER AND RACIAL GEOGRAPHICAL AND EVALUATION FOCUS*

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Subject		Racial Focus			Geographical Focus					Evaluation		
stitution/ideas	Total	Black	White	Neutral	Univ	RI	US	Africa	Other	Positive	Negative	Neutral
ucation	16	15	1	0	9	6	1	0	0	14	3	0
onomics	24	21	1	1	0	15	7	1	0	10	10	4
mmunication	7	7	0	0	3	1	3	0	0	4	0	3
vt/politics	20	13	7	0	0	8	6	3	3	3	15	1
ciety/culture	14	11	1	1	7	4	3	0	0	6	4	4
alth	3	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	3	0	0
neral	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
btotal	87	71	11	4	20	37	21	6	4	39	34	14
rsons												
Men	7	6	1	0	1	0	6	0	0	6	1	0
Women	6	6	0	0	3	1	1	0	0	6	1	0
tal	(100)	(83)	(13	(4)	(24)	(38)	(28)	(6)	(4)	(51)	(35)	(14)

ercentages are rounded.

TABLE II

DISTRIBUTION OF CONTENT BY ITEM THEMES

Theme	No. of items	%
Unity	10	14
Progress	20	28
Power/self reliance	8	11
Discrimination/racism	23	33
Colonialism	4	5
Other	6	9
	71	100